

Here Be Dragons©

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Having seen a recent text about the death of Glaurung (the Father of Dragons from the *Silmarillion*), I thought it might be interesting to take an overview of the way dragons feature in some of our most popular myths and folklore. From heraldic emblems to corporate logos, dragons are everywhere we look and some of our legends are based on fact, believe it or not. *Please note that this piece is **not** a detailed exposition on dragons in literature.*

Let's start with the fact that many ancient cultures incorporated the dragon into their mythologies, including China, Egypt, Greece, Scandinavia, Israel and Anglo-Saxon, just to name a few. Of course, the interpretation of dragons varied enormously – the main Biblical references in Isaiah, Job, Exodus and Revelation equate the dragon with the serpent or as a metaphor for evil. And, to be fair, in the Middle Ages, the image of St George slaying the dragon was often used as a popular analogy of the forces of Christendom overcoming the monster of unbelief or even, dare it be said, paganism.

Some might say that the legend of St Patrick ridding Ireland of serpents is a variant on this theme, although there are ancient writings that link St Patrick with Irish Celtic paganism in a much closer way.



The picture shows a common image of the fire-breathing, flying creature, so beloved of fiction, from Harry Potter to Tolkien, and in films, from *Eragon* to *Reign of Fire*. If we jump back 5000 years or so to ancient China, their concept of a dragon is unrecognisable to Smaug or Ancalagon the Black (or Glaurung).

The ancient Chinese culture still prevails today in that the dragon was a symbol of power, embodied in the person of the emperor. There were several types of dragons and 2012 was the Year of the Water Dragon (the year, Feb 2024-Jan 2025 will be the Year of the Wood Dragon). Most of the dragons were linked to the elements of water (both rain and rivers), wood, earth, metal and fire.

All the great Chinese rivers are named after dragons, eg the Heilongjian or Black Dragon. Similarly, the O-Gon-Cho dragon of Vietnamese myth was a creature of water and rainfall, vital for rice crops. Dragons are revered by the Chinese for courage, power, heroism, intelligence and ambition; we still see dragons as ornaments on all types of Chinese goods, from banners or clothes to dragon-boats.



Actually, thinking about dragon boats leads me to reflect upon dragon lore that is based on fact. The Danes were well-known for their raids on English coastal towns during the period of 700-1000 CE, as can be seen from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and they were great believers in dragons.

Dragons were believed to live either underground or at the bottom of the sea, eg Nidhogg, the great dragon/serpent that lay at the roots of the world tree, Yggdrasil. That is why so many Danish ships had dragons carved on their prows – as a symbol of bravery, to frighten opponents and to protect the crews against sea monsters.

However, there is a local Sussex legend which is based on fact and features a dragon. In 894 CE, a Danish raid looted Bosham and intended to destroy Chichester: this is noted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The Danes were wary of Saxon resistance and approached Chichester by night, stopping in Kingley Vale. While they were among the yew trees, a mist arose and (allegedly) took the form of a dragon, whilst the trees seemed to menace the invaders. The Danes thought they were being attacked and ended up slaughtering each other in the mist and the gloom. The Chronicle says that the Danes were killed by the Saxon residents, but the yew grove still exudes an air of ancient menace.

The most common English dragons in our folklore are giant serpents or worms, derived from the Saxon words, *wyrm* or *vurm*. These creatures have no wings or legs, but do have scales and poisonous breath – and can reform if cut into pieces (like other worms). Such monsters occur throughout local legends, eg the Lambton Worm (near Durham), and Bram Stoker wrote a short novel in the 19th century entitled *The Lair of the White Worm* that drew upon these legends. It should be noted that wyverns are dragon variants with the legs and wings of eagles and the bodies of serpents.

Actually, Sussex and Surrey have a wealth of folk legends relating to dragons, including the Cissbury Serpent, the Crawley dragon and the serpents/worms of St Leonard's Forest. The popular term for them is *knucker*, derived perhaps from the Saxon word *Nicor*, meaning water monster. At Lyminster (near Arundel), there is a deep pond known as the Knucker Pond and it was the lair of a terrible dragon that preyed on local children and residents in the Middle Ages. It even killed knights, but was killed finally by a local man who tricked it into eating a poisoned pie. Here's another myth that has its roots in reality – **the Green Dragons**.

*Once upon a time, over 1100 years ago, there was a small village called **Wermehalte**. That was its recorded name in the Domesday Book, but the vill itself had been settled for at least 200 years before that. It was literally carved out of the middle of a forest in what we might call Middlesex, but in those days, much of the land to the west of London was either deep forest or sandy heathland.*

Not too many people lived in Wermehalte. Its name came from the Saxon terms for dragon (wurm) and forest (halte). Basically, it was an area of trees, frequented by wyrms. These were not basilisks or fire-breathers, but much, much worse – large, green serpents with poisonous fangs, perfect for hiding amongst trees and thick undergrowth.

Consider the danger, if you can – each time a villager went to collect firewood or a child went to pick blackberries or mushrooms, was that a sudden movement in the bracken? Was the green of the leaves hiding the scales of a wurm? Over the years, many children went to forage for food and never returned home; likewise, several unwary travellers strayed into the woods and only their remains were found by the path.

Finally, the situation became so bad that King John ordered the vill of Wermehalte to be emptied and the homesteaders were moved to other places, far from the forest. This cunning plan didn't really work though, as the starving green wyrms began to attack other small settlements on the edges of the woods. So, the king ordered the forest to be razed to the ground – all the trees were felled and it became a scrubland of bracken, old stumps and brambles. Where did the wyrms go?

Some left, ending up in other places and other tales, such as Clendon, St Leonards and Basingstoke. Others, it is said, dug caves under the hills and still sleep underground. Over the centuries, London expanded and factories or houses were built, but still the wasteland of Wermehalte stayed untouched. Until 1874, that is, when the Victorians decided to build on the site – and this is now the location of the famous prison, Wormwood Scrubs!



One common pattern that was prevalent in dragon folklore is the early struggle between paganism - symbolised as a dragon - and Christianity. A carving of a conquered dragon can be found on the font of the church at Avebury. Paganism is often depicted as dragons or other monsters in early Christian art and folklore has dragons linked to creatures that test young heroes, guard treasure or maidens and live in deep caves or lakes.

The dragon described in Revelation is killed by the Archangel Michael, but there are links to both the fire-drake in Beowulf and St George legends, with appropriate emphasis on heroism and Christian virtues. This legend was common throughout England, with St Guy of Arundel, St Sampson of Cornwall and St Serf of Kinnoul all noted for dragon-slaying.

Other saints did not kill their dragons, but used more humane methods. St Petroc whispered a prayer in the ear of a Cornish dragon, which caused it to swim away. St Carantoc led a dragon away from its swamp lair to the wilderness. At Winlatter (in Derbyshire), the local priest fought a dragon so hard that footprints were left in the solid rock and the dragon went to live in the local mines where his fiery breath continues to warm local springs.

It's a long way from the Chinese custom of honouring and worshipping their dragons. So, when you come to celebrate St George's Day, remember to spare a thought for the dragon, which has a far longer and nobler lineage than that of the knightly hero!